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SUBJECT: HONOR CRIMES IN JORDAN: THE TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE

REF: A. AMMAN 1509
[B](#). AMMAN 1318
[C](#). AMMAN 1204
[D](#). AMMAN 1203
[E](#). AMMAN 471

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[1](#). (SBU) Summary: Tribal leaders have a unique perspective on the issue of honor crimes in Jordan. In their role as mediators of community disputes and exemplars of morality, sheikhs frequently prevent domestic squabbles from escalating into honor crimes. The tribal leaders we talked to criticized media coverage of the issue and noted that violent incidents caused by slights to a family's honor are relatively rare. While a minority of sheikhs attempted to justify the practice of honor crimes, most claimed that the practice is self-defeating in the eyes of tribal law. Sheikhs see marriage as the ultimate solution to the problem of honor crimes, but exiling women or their families is often used to prevent violence as well. Tribal leaders reject the use of legislation or increased penalties as a way to combat honor crimes and suggested instead that tribal leaders needed to become more involved in their communities and respond to honor crimes in a uniform fashion. End Summary.

The Tribal Perspective

[2](#). (SBU) Much of the debate on honor crimes in Jordan occurs among the educated elite. Newspaper editorials and NGO reports often outline the contours of the problem, but rarely cite traditional voices who are considered hostile to their point of view. In an effort to more fully understand the practice, post sought out tribal leaders in both rural and urban communities who are frequently branded as either active or passive supporters of honor crimes. The sheikhs we met with were surprisingly forthcoming about their views on honor crimes and their practical experiences in trying to prevent them.

The Nature of the Problem

[3](#). (SBU) The sheikhs emphasized that honor crimes in Jordan are very rare and criticized the media for blowing the problem out of proportion. One tribal leader told us that he commonly deals with disputes involving "land and sheep," but has never in his long career encountered a case where a slight against family honor led to violence. Some tribal contacts denied that honor crimes are an issue at all among Jordanians and blamed the problem on foreign workers from Egypt and Iraq. (Note: There is no evidence to suggest that this is the case. End Note.) Tribal leaders also challenged the popular stereotype that honor crimes are a rural phenomenon, pointing out that most killings occur in lower class areas of large cities. Many tribal leaders see the tightly knit and religiously active nature of rural

communities as a bulwark against the social problems that lead to honor crimes.

¶4. (SBU) While conventional wisdom among elite commentators is that honor crimes are the result of a "backwards tribal mentality," tribal leaders take the opposite view. They believe that honor crimes are the result of too little tribal influence, not too much. From their perspective, migrants to Jordan's cities move from an atmosphere where the community deals with problems through established tribal authority structures into a free-for-all where nobody is socially accountable for their actions. Sheikhs told us that their salons are "open twenty-four hours" for resolution of disputes -- a benefit not available to rootless city dwellers.

¶5. (SBU) Most of the sheikhs we talked to credited tribal mediation of disputes for preventing disputes from escalating into honor crimes. Sheikhs are traditionally responsible for negotiating solutions for domestic disputes over marriage, divorce, and relationships between the sexes. When a problem surfaces in their communities that involves family honor, tribal leaders are charged with keeping the debate civil and resolving problems before they spiral out of control. From the tribal perspective, the fact that the vast majority of domestic disputes are successfully dealt with by the tribal infrastructure ensures that honor crimes are the exception, not the norm.

Honor Crimes in Tribal Law

¶6. (SBU) Sheikhs told us repeatedly that honor crimes are self-defeating in the tribal system of law and social practice (Refs C and D). Since tribal ethics value generosity and chivalry above all else, an honor crime only

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proves that the perpetrator lacks the honor that he claims to defend. While tribal law honors women in different ways than the modern world does, sheikhs nevertheless highlighted the special value the tribes place on the contributions of women to the family and community. Several tribal leaders pointed out that honor crimes can spark a needless cycle of revenge killings that ultimately results in casualties among the perpetrator's family. On top of the futility of honor crimes in the system of tribal law, sheikhs pointed out that there is no justification in Islam for such a practice.

¶7. (SBU) Not all of the sheikhs were unanimous in their belief that tribal law condemns honor crimes. A prominent leader of the Beni Hassan tribe (known in Jordan for its hard-line stance on social issues) said that slights to a family's honor caused by alleged sexual impropriety could only be cleansed by the death of both the man and the woman. (Note: There have been no reported cases of honor crimes against men to our knowledge. End Note.) Furthermore, unlike most tribes in Jordan, the Beni Hassan tribe does not believe that marriage can cleanse a family's honor.

The Tribal Solution: Marriage or Exile

¶8. (SBU) Sheikhs were unequivocal in their support for marriage as the ultimate solution for honor crimes and said that most disputes end when tribal leaders convince (or force) a couple to marry. Several tribal leaders lamented the difficulty that many couples face in getting married and implied that the rising cost of marriage and overly picky relatives were increasingly driving young people into clandestine relationships.

¶9. (SBU) Exile is another tool that tribal leaders often use to head off a potential honor crime. Sheikhs told us that women accused of slighting the family's honor are often sent away to a far corner of Jordan to avoid an escalation of tensions. The families of these women frequently request

exile as a solution to avoid choosing between killing their daughters or suffering the scorn of the community. Exile allows families and sheikhs to distance themselves from the problem to let cooler heads prevail. Tribal leaders told us that many exile agreements are temporary -- they end when a marriage agreement is brokered or families formally agree not to react violently.

The Tribal Role in Prevention of Honor Crimes

¶10. (SBU) Tribal leaders have a unique -- and ultimately self-serving -- perspective on what can be done to prevent honor crimes. Many sheikhs said that honor crimes are evidence that tribal leaders are not doing their job. The traditional role of the sheikh is to prevent disputes from escalating into a problem for the community at large. The existence of honor crimes proves to many of our tribal interlocutors that sheikhs must be more proactive in watching over their kin, involving themselves in resolution of local disputes, and proving themselves worthy of the community's trust in dealing with sensitive issues.

¶11. (SBU) Sheikhs were unanimous in arguing that the solution to honor crimes does not lie in amending the penal code to allow for harsher penalties, but rather in their own intervention in community life. In their view, changing the penal code represents merely a reaction that will not stop honor crimes. One group of tribal leaders suggested that a more effective way of approaching the issue would be to create a common understanding among tribal leaders of how to deal with honor crimes in local communities. They suggested that the government could bring tribal leaders together to develop a consensus among the tribes on solutions that could be applied throughout Jordan.

¶12. (SBU) Several sheikhs talked about the role of education in solving the honor crimes problem. From their perspective, however, "education" does not mean formal, institutionalized training. To tribal leaders, education means knowing and appreciating the role that tribal law and tribal leaders play in informal dispute resolution. Sheikhs told us that the encroachment of the modern world into the life of the tribes had weakened their ability to intervene in community life and maintain societal peace. In their view, teaching younger members of the tribes about the proper role of the sheikh in dispute resolution could be the first step in developing their use of tribal avenues to prevent honor crimes from happening.

Comment

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¶13. (SBU) In spite of their lack of unanimity in condemning the practice and continuing promotion of conservative cultural norms, tribal leaders believe they have a role to play in the prevention of honor crimes in Jordan. While sheikhs sometimes disagree on the intrinsic morality of honor crimes, they do agree that proper tribal leadership prevents family squabbles from reaching the point where an honor crime occurs. The lack of an unequivocal stance against honor crimes by tribal leaders causes activists in Jordan to see sheikhs as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. As a result, there is little dialogue between tribal leaders and civil society that could lead to a common understanding and cooperation. Similarly, Jordan's government has yet to engage the tribes in the fight against honor crimes or bring sheikhs and activists together in a constructive way.

Beecroft